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The Postgraduate Supervisor Under Scrutiny: An Autoethnographic Inquiry

Abstract   Effective postgraduate supervision is a critical indicator of individual scholarship and institutional reputation. This paper uses autoethnography to scrutinize critical moments in the author's enactment of the supervisory role over a lengthy career at a distance education university, where supervision takes place through face-to-face consultation, distance education, or a combination of both modes. Autoethnography, an innovative addition to the compendium of qualitative research methods, is gaining prominence as a means of examining the academic life through the personal and professional histories of individual academics. The author's aim is to focus both inward on the vulnerable self as expressed in the role of academic supervisor and outward on the social and cultural aspects of this role as it is shaped within the context of the university. This has been done by constructing a text with a high degree of self-reflexivity, which combines evocative and literary elements with some explicit theorizing around generativity theory. Generativity is defined as an adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of the next generation, in this case, the intellectual well-being of future cohorts of scholars. Against the framework of generativity, a series of autobiographical vignettes illustrate self-defining moments in the author's development as supervisor. The role of memory and memory supports in producing an accurate story and measures taken to interact with the characters in the stories to enhance textual credibility are addressed. The vignettes illustrate the desire to conduct supervision as a generative act; cultural demand for generativity; the transmission of a personal aesthetic in supervision; the separation-individuation of the student; the redemption of generative commitment in the face of threats to generativity; and the perpetuation of the generative cycle. I conclude that autoethnography as method presents a useful route to both self-understanding and social understanding of the academic life, with particular reference to the role of postgraduate supervisor.

Keywords   Postgraduate Supervision; Autoethnography; Generativity; Generative Commitment; Vignettes; Self-Defining Memories

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Postgraduate supervising is one of the primary tasks of an academic. Beside one's own research, supervising probably consumes the greatest amount of time and energy in the daily round of academic labor (Austin 2011). Postgraduate supervision is also a critical indicator of institutional research reputation and of individual intellectual leadership (Delaney 2008). The image we have of ourselves as supervisors and the stories we relate about the relationships, achievements, and mishaps experienced during postgraduate guidance (as well as the incidents deliberately omitted in our self-representation) form an important part of our identity as scholars. The goal of this paper is to examine postgraduate supervision through the lens of my experience as a supervisor of more than forty students over a lengthy career played out at a distance education university in southern Africa using autoethnography. In so doing, I reflect on how my practice has been shaped by this specialized space, as well as my own vision and embodiment of supervision.

The university where I work is classified as a comprehensive institution which reflects a mixed academic and vocational mission over a predominantly research mission (Botha 2011). Postgraduate education is massified and a full professor is expected to supervise at least ten research degree candidates at a time. Supervision is carried out through a single or a mixed mode of delivery, depending on students' geographical location: face-to-face consultation and/or e-mail, telephonic contact, and written correspondence. Shifts in delivery modes are the result of technological developments—when I began my career thirty years ago, students' work arrived in brown manila envelopes in the staff post room and the supervisor's notations were penned in the margins of the texts before the document was mailed back for revision. Today written correspondence is exclusively via e-mail and supervisory commentary is made e-documents.

To interrogate this normally taken-for-granted part of my academic life (Van Maanen 1979), I have opted for autoethnography. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method, variously referred to by different writers as self-narrative, personal narrative, auto-observation, first-person account, and personal ethnography (Walford 2004). Schwandt (2007:17) defines autoethnography as "a particular form of writing that seeks to unite ethnographic (looking outward at a world beyond one's own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of one's self) intentions." Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) extend this definition to include all aesthetic projects in autoethnographic work, such as poetry, painting, film, dance, photographic essays, and dramatic performances. In autoethnography, the researcher occupies a unique place as a participant observer of his/her own experience, and is thereby engaged in constructing a portrait of self rather than that of the Other (Tillmann-Healy and Kiesinger 2001). The use of the researcher as intentionally vulnerable subject is not just allowed but also validated (Holman Jones et al. 2013). Gannon (2006:475) explains, "[i]n autoethnography, the subject and object of research collapse into the body/thoughts/feelings of the (auto) ethnographer located in his or her particular space and time." Autoethnography also aims to link the self with the social and cultural world—the self in relationship with others in a social context. It explores how the self has been influenced and molded

by the surrounding context and how the self has responded and reacted to, or resisted, contextual influences (Ellis 2004). Thus, autoethnography is a tool for individual, as well as social understanding (Ellis 2007). Further, autoethnographers endeavor to make themselves vulnerable in the texts they create by "making personal experience available for consideration" (Holman Jones et al. 2013:24). By drawing attention to vulnerabilities that human beings share but may normally hide, autoethnographers create evocative literary and analytic texts whereby they seek a reciprocal relationship with the reader in order to educe a response that is not only cognitive but also emotional, and even physical (Holman Jones et al. 2013).

The origins of autoethnography can be traced to the post-Chicago school of sociology in the United States (U.S.) during the 1970s. During the early 1990s, autoethnography as an emerging qualitative method was nurtured by a growing contingent of social scientists who had roots in sociology, anthropology, and communication, and who were mainly located in the U.S., Canada, and Britain. Autoethnography quickly gained currency after its inclusion as innovative newcomer to qualitative inquiry in the authoritative *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin and Lincoln 1994) and subsequent issues of the same. In particular, Carolyn Ellis, professor of sociology and communications, University of South Florida, championed and developed autoethnography (Holman Jones et al. 2013). In the 21st century, the application of autoethnography across academic disciplines has burgeoned in the Anglo-American literature dedicated to qualitative inquiry (Douglas and Carless 2013). Nonetheless, autoethnography is

still surrounded by some debate concerning theoretical and methodological issues. In particular, it has been critiqued for a lack of theoretical engagement (Gannon 2006). Central to this debate was Anderson's (2006; 2011) attempt to distinguish between two broad types: the evocative, literary autoethnography, as exemplified by Ellis' work, and analytic autoethnography. Evocative autoethnography explicitly aims to engender an emotional resonance in the reader with the author, and its usefulness as therapeutic tool for both author and reader is strongly defended. The form and register of the evocative text is poetic, performative, and literary; the emphasis lies on the story (Holman Jones et al. 2013). In contrast, analytic autoethnography functions predominantly as a theoretical tool to analyze and interpret a broader set of social phenomena (Anderson 2006). More recently, scholars (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010; Tedlock 2013) reject the idea of a binary model with the evocative and the analytic as opposite poles in favor of a continuum along which exemplars of autoethnographic writings can be positioned, depending on the researcher's goals and the predominant features of the writing project.

Against this background, I have found in autoethnography a creative tool to render the self, inevitably present in the background of any research project, more visible and active in the text, thus adding a valid dimension of human experience, which could contribute richness and color to the findings and allow for deeper levels of reflexivity. However, as a postgraduate supervisor with some reputation, even if only in my modest local sphere, this choice involves deliberate risk—what must emerge are my weaknesses, as well as strengths. Instead of an ide-

alized portrait of myself, I wish to bring my own frailty into the text as I examine the layers that make up my supervisory self. Autoethnography offers me an ideal means to plumb the concealed world of the academic wo[man] and extract the untidy educational and personal history that lies beneath my careful chronological curriculum vitae, with its deliberate omissions and inclusions (Brodkey 1996). Thus, in this paper, I have purposefully "brought insides outside, unearthed knowledge, and exposed at least a little of those secret elements of academic life about which we are not supposed to speak publicly" (Learmonth and Humphreys 2011:113). My intention is that this transparency will invite a response in which, emboldened by my story, the reader will come to grips with his/her own self and to engage in conversation about his/her own professional struggles. Finally, with due consideration to the possibilities of autoethnographic writing in terms of the styles and strategies of composition, which range from the artful and creative text to the more analytic kind (Tedlock 2013:358), this paper "braids" evocative realism with some explicit theorizing based on generativity theory as expounded by Erikson and developed by McAdams, de St. Aubin, and others (see below). I have applied this theoretical framework to my story of postgraduate supervision as it exemplifies the key concepts of generative desire, care, commitment, redemption, and belief.

Generativity Theory and Supervision

Erikson's (1950) life cycle model of human development proposes that a person passes through eight stages from infancy to late adulthood. In each stage,

the person faces, and should resolve, a developmental crisis. A crisis represents a turning point for the person rather than a catastrophe—"a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential for development" (Erikson 1978:5). The successful resolution of each developmental crisis produces a virtue or strength appropriate to that stage, which adds to the person's competencies and abilities and makes him/her more able to face the crisis of the following stage of the life cycle. Poor or regressive development is the result of a failure to resolve the crisis of a life stage successfully. Thus, each stage builds upon the successful completion of earlier stages; crises of stages not successfully completed may be expected to reappear as problems in the future (Erikson 1978).

Erikson's seventh stage of adult development is the long stretch of midlife, flagged at approximately 35-65 years (Erikson 1950) or 65 years + in the 21st century (Batesman 2010). The central task of midlife is the achievement of generativity versus its opposite pole, stagnation. Generativity is defined as establishing and guiding future generations through the creation and maintenance of a wide range of institutional, cultural, and individual resources that are necessary to sustain intergenerational solidarity (Erikson 1964). To have and raise children is a typical generative activity, but generativity extends beyond a deeply held concern for one's biological offspring to the next generation to which one's own and/or other children belong (McAdams and Logan 2004). The self-centered person who is unable or unwilling to help society move forward through generative actions is stagnant and frustrated by his/her relative lack of productivity. Holding the poles

of generativity and stagnation in a dynamic and sound balance is essential to produce the emergent virtue, that is, care for persons, products, and ideas (Erikson 1978). The benefits of generativity are bi-directional: the generative adult creates legacies of self to benefit future generations, while simultaneously reaping a sense of meaning, which is incorporated into his/her self-identity and which combats despair during the final life stage, old age (Erikson 1964).

Many scholars have built on Erikson's seminal theory of generativity. Consequently, generativity has been developed into a complex, multidimensional construct, which has been richly applied in diverse disciplines (Schoklitsch and Baumann 2012). A selective overview is given of the most significant of this scholarship. Kotre (1984:112) was the first to redefine generativity as the desire and effort to invest one's life and one's work in that which will "outlive the self." He (Kotre 1984) expanded the concept by proposing two modes of generative expression: agency and communion. Agency involves the expansion of the self through creating something that is self-promoting; communion includes giving what one has created to others for their benefit and use (de St. Aubin 2013). According to Kotre (1984), generativity exists in four domains: the biological (as in procreation), the parental (as in child-raising), the technical (as in teaching knowledge and skills to others), and the cultural (as in creating and passing down a product in which the self is expressed). Generativity theory has been further extended by the individual and the collaborative work of McAdams and de St. Aubin over more than two decades. McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) (also McAdams, Hart, and Maruna 1998) produced a seven-dimensional theory of the process of generativity. According to this model, generativity functions in terms of seven interrelated features: 1) an inner desire for agentic and communal legacy combines with 2) cultural demand embodied in age-related social norms for the adult to produce outcomes to benefit the next generation, which in turn produces 3) a concern for the next generation. This concern is boosted by 4) a belief in the worthwhile nature of the human endeavor, and this leads to 5) a commitment, which produces 6) generative acts defined as creating, maintaining, or offering what has been created or maintained to the community. This may embrace caring for children (one's own and those of others) transmitting traditions, knowledge, and skills, investing in one's community as guide, mentor, and leader, and/or producing creative works that survive the self. Finally, the adult captures his/her generative action by constructing 7) a narration of generativity, which is part of the individual's broader life story that makes up a person's identity. The life story may in itself be part of one's legacy offered to others who may benefit from knowing about one's life (McAdams 2001). Thus, generativity scholarship revolves around the life story, and this emphasis intersects with the loosely-coordinated, interdisciplinary movement in the social sciences, the narrative study of lives (McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich 2006; Clandinin 2007). However, the life story in all its variations as it features in the narrative genre is allied to, but not synonymous with, autoethnography. Life stories as data are generally elicited from a participant and interpreted by the researcher (Trahar 2009). The study of generativity in life stories, as applied by McAdams (2006), de St. Aubin (2013), and others, is extremely valuable for their portrayal of storied human experience, but storyteller and story analyst do not coalesce as they do in autoethnography.

An accumulation of generative desire, commitment, and action nourishes and sustains social norms around generativity, and may eventually contribute to institutions with a generative character and mission, which have the potential to produce a generative society (McAdams 2006). Ball (2012) interrogates the function of the university as generator, transmitter, and curator of knowledge in the light of generativity theory. Teaching and mentoring activities directly address intergenerational cultural transmission, and university-community engagement is an opportunity to enact generative care for others as is research in the service of humankind. However, as McAdams and colleagues (1998) argue, generativity is not automatic; generativity as related to academe is only realized when academics execute the university's mission out of a deliberate concern for others, and not as a series of disinterested acts of self-interest (Melo 2008).

In the light of this exposition, I conclude that generativity theory is a useful analytic tool for an understanding of my own history as postgraduate supervisor. Postgraduate supervision, as a form of mentoring, shares similarities with the prototypical generative act of parenting—the nurture of a protégé's latent abilities, material support, emotional encouragement, and the correction of weaknesses, all aimed at the attainment of the charge's eventual independence (Lemmer 2014). Like all authentic generative action, postgraduate supervision promotes the development of others and is rewarded by experiencing another's development as if it were one's own (Urrutia et al. 2009).

Method: Constructing the Text

Writing autoethnography for publication challenges the researcher to provide sufficient attention to methodological detail to meet the accepted standards of conventional academic work, yet without compromising the attention given to the ultimate product, the story (Wall 2008). With this in mind, I have provided a brief audit trail, tracking how I carried out data gathering, report writing, analysis, and the implementation of measures to enhance credibility. Autoethnographic data collection and analysis is systematic and intentional, thus distinguishing it as a research method from other forms of personal writing (Chang 2008). Ngunjiri and colleagues (2010) identify four phases of autoethnographic writing: the preliminary phase (self-writing and reflection); the subsequent phase (additional data collection, self-writing, and reflection); data analysis and interpretation (data review and coding); and report writing (meaning-making and outlining). In practice, these phases are seldom as neatly packaged as these authors have suggested. I constantly moved between the different phases of writing, frequently working in all four phases during a single writing session.

In the preliminary phase, I created an accurate chronological record of the postgraduate students whom I have supervised over a period of twenty-five years by using the electronic archival records of my institution. In the subsequent phase, I wrote notes on the students who featured most prominently

in my recollected experiences as supervisor. The reasons for my choices were eclectic: students who became close friends; promising students who initially lacked the required admission requirements for the degree and for whose admission I had waged bureaucratic battles; students who were also colleagues at the university; students who completed the thesis solely through distance education without any face-to-face supervision; and a student whose thesis was referred back by the examination panel for revision and re-examination. Notes were enriched by reconstructing conversations and settings. My reminiscences were honed by documents and artifacts: students' theses in the institutional library and on my bookshelf; photos of graduation ceremonies and celebrations; students' thank-you cards, letters, and poems; and reflective notes which I made at the completion of each student's work. Yet, in all this, memories were the primary building blocks of my story, and the process of recall was alternatively systematic and disorderly (Gorgio 2013). Memories considered for inclusion in the autoethnography met Pillemer's (2001) criteria for personal event memories: defined temporal and geographical location, specificity of personal circumstances, sensory images, the association of the image to a particular turning point in life, and the conviction that the memory in question is a faithful representation of events. The chronology of time was often abandoned for the chronology of emotion (Ellis 2009); inspiring memories spontaneously elicited more of their kind, as did painful memories or "memories with a sting" (Denzin 2013:126). In the third phase of data analysis and interpretation, I loosely used generativity theory, as already mentioned, to abstract and explain the social processes involved in my life

and work as supervisor. Finally, to structure the report, I opted for a series of six vignettes to illustrate the most significant discoveries about myself as supervisor. Vignettes were a useful narrative strategy to carry my protracted story forward (Humphreys 2005). Vignettes record epiphanies in a character's life (Plummer 2001), that is, "critical biographical experiences … existential turning point moments" (Denzin 2013:131), when one's motives and emotions are illuminated by intentional self-reflection. In this vein, I organized my drafted notes around striking moments revolving around a relationship, a process, or an emotional experience. This was followed by a process of making a final strategic selection of the vignettes for inclusion in this paper (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). Finally, I sought some kind of validation for my story through the testimony of others, that is, the "characters" present in the story. This linked to the autoethnographer's responsibility to behave ethically concerning the disclosure given to others in a self-narrative (Ellis 2004). I fulfilled this commitment by engaging, where possible, with the key persons featured in my text (Ellis 2007) so that they were aware and consenting about any references I had made to them.

Vignette 1: Origins of Generative Desire

One winter's afternoon in 1979, my mother and I sat in my children's bedroom. The lawn outside the window was burnt brown by the early morning frosts. The air was dry and harsh. I was crocheting intricate lacy squares in cheap red wool. My mother knitted. My two little girls were fractious with winter colds and their irritable whines frequently interrupted us. Suddenly my mother looked up. Her

glance took in the whole room—the bargain-basement furnishings, the make-do illustrations with nursery rhyme characters gummed to the walls in lieu of real pictures. "Look where you are today!," she said in a brittle voice, "Your father and I wasted our money on you by sending you to university! It never got you very far." I froze. I bent my head over my work and pretended I had never heard her reproach. The cheap yarn scratched and stuck to the crochet hook. The children coughed. I blinked at the pattern. I could not even crochet properly and what was more, my mother was right. I had never put my university education to use—only a year's experience in a special needs school, where I had not even taught English Literature, my major. I was defenseless before her rebuke. The worst thing for a daughter from a hardworking, middle class background like mine was to disappoint her parents. And I had let my parents down badly.

A decade later, my parents, my family, and I were seated in the grand hall of the university where I was now senior lecturer. During my thirties, I was enabled by my own agency combined with a set of serendipitous circumstances to resurrect my abandoned ambition to pursue further studies. In less than five years, I acquired three postgraduate degrees through distance education and secured a position at the very institution that had helped me realize my aspirations. That night as we awaited the first notes of *Gaudeamus Igitur* to usher in the academic procession, I studied my parents from my front row seat reserved for doctoral candidates. They were seated in upper balcony of the tiered auditorium with my daughters sandwiched between them, my father in his dark suit, my mother in grey

silk purchased for the occasion. My dad was searching his pockets for the ever-handy peppermints to give eleven-year-old Cath to suck for distraction. Ruth at thirteen stared ahead. My parents were proud; my husband, a fellow academic, in cap and gown, beamed at me from the dais; the girls were bored, but proud. So, I thought to myself, my parents' hard-earned money was not wasted. I had "got somewhere" after all. I had been afforded a second chance at a distance education institution that offered mature students the opportunity to combine employment with part-time studies. Deep within me I resolved to pass on this good fortune to every other second-chancer who knocked at my office door. The joy could not, would not, be hoarded.

Today these two dialectical memories embody the first step in the generative process, the birth of an intense desire to pass on an intellectual legacy to my postgraduate students (McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992). Together, the events made up the "crystallizing moment" (Gardner 1993:44), which birthed an idealized image of the kind of supervisor I longed to be and of supervision as a generative activity. This was not impulsive whimsy in response to the occasion of my graduation as doctor of education. I determined that my opportunity to have made good should feed into someone else's hopes, dreams, and aspirations (McAdams 2006). As Karpiak (2000:130) puts it, "the crisis as call"—my ambition of an academic career, once humiliatingly lost, now regained—became the lynchpin around which I organized lengthy academic career. I committed consciously to conduct myself, not solely in self-interest, but as one who had a worthwhile legacy to bequeath (McAdams et al. 1998).

Vignette 2: Cultural Demand for Generativity

If generativity's deep-seated roots lie in individual desire, cultural demand may be regarded as its external motivational source (McAdams et al. 1998). The social and cultural setting of my university provided the occupational and ideological framework for supervisory practice and the extent to which my generative interpretation of supervision was encouraged. When I was allotted my first postgraduate student, no formal training opportunities in the role of supervisor existed, although such training is freely available today through the frequent presentation of professional development workshops at my institution. My notion of how I should behave as a committed supervisor was modeled to me by the life and work of my own doctoral advisor, Professor O. Fittingly; he handed me the torch on an oppressively hot summer's morning in February 1990. "Mr. N., may I introduce you to Dr X. She'll be supervising your Master's study and I, of course, will be on hand if either of you need me." Professor O. ushered a middle-aged man, formal in suit and tie, into my small, starkly furnished office on the 6th floor of the high-rise building which housed the Faculty of Education. So supervision was added to my undergraduate teaching duties. Exhilarated I welcomed the supervision of Mr. N's dissertation to my workload. I felt "grown up," a proper academic, judged mature enough to be entrusted with the responsibility of a postgraduate student. At last I could also talk airily at tea break to my peers about "my" student.

That morning I dragged my chair so I could sit alongside the two men in front of my desk on which a blank notepad and pencil lay ready. Mr. N. was an educational planner in a government department and had the air of a man in authority. He was decisive about his topic, which was directly related to his professional responsibilities. I carefully took him through the structure of the proposed first chapter. I scribbled, scribbled, scribbled while I talked. Words, arrows, circles outlined the familiar composition of the first chapter. Mr. N. gathered the discarded pages. "Oh, don't, don't!" I exclaimed when I watched scraps carefully stowed in his briefcase, "I'm just thinking out loud." Professor O. looked on without comment. Then he leaned back and tilted his chair a little, stretched out his long legs, and hooked a shapely hand into his trouser pocket. I recognized his body language. Throughout the writing of my own master's dissertation and doctoral thesis, I had been a conscientious disciple of Professor O's exposition of the meta-narrative of scientific writing: precise problem formulation, research questions which cohered elegantly with aims, and a précis of the research design. His insistence on form and structure has influenced me to this day.

Oh, and would you please submit your typed work, chapter by chapter. Double spaced so I have room to add my comments. Just one chapter at a time. Only when we are both quite satisfied, should you go on. But, of course, that doesn't stop you from reading ahead. Just keep reading and reading! That's what Professor O. taught me!

Was that patronizing? Heavy-handed? Mr. N. was at least ten years older than me; I was acutely aware of my inexperience, gender, class. Professor O. added, "And I also look forward to reading your work, Mr. N. Such a relevant topic you have chosen. I won't join your meetings, but I am always available—just across the corridor." Then he nodded at me, "Mr. N., you've got yourself a good supervisor." I was abashed but grateful, too, especially since I was untested. Mr. N. was reserved, cordial, and unassuming. I seemed to have struck the right note after all. Professor O's approval took me back to my introduction to the Department Chair two years earlier, when I had first joined the university, with only a half-finished master's dissertation. The Chair had gestured towards Professor O. with same emphatic comment, "You've got yourself a good supervisor." Not to be a good supervisor in my Department was shocking. I was thoroughly aware of the oral tradition of the "bad" supervisor—careless, indifferent, a slacker who kept students waiting for feedback for months. I had heard rumors of dissatisfied students who had gone to as far as to insist that the Dean appoint another advisor. Quality service to students was normative in my university. Dominant organizational traditions, values, and practices regarding the accountability of university teachers to their student charges reinforced my inner generative desire to care deeply for my own students (McAdams and Logan 2004). After Mr. N. graduated, Professor O. discontinued his advisory role. By then I was already working with several other students, solo and eager to share my new methodological interests. Generativity was thus modeled by my supervisor and fostered by cultural demand within the institution (Karpiak 2000); I now added my own oil to the flame.

Vignette 3: Transmission of a Personal Aesthetic

Generative desire, located in a grand question or defining experience and fuelled by cultural demand, is animated by personal aesthetic, that is, the idealized image of something that the generative adult longs to experience, to make, and to transmit to others (McAdams and Logan 2004). In the late 1980s, positivism reigned in the Faculty of Education, where I worked. My doctoral study was marked by my opportune encounter with qualitative methodology, and I had been coached at a distance by the likes of Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Lofland and Lofland (1984), and Wolcott (1973). My supervisor, Professor O., had remained aloof from my breakthrough, but my enthusiasm easily won him over and he gave me free rein in my inquiry. My discovery of qualitative methodology both satisfied the tenets of my epistemology and shaped a vision of how research should be done, which resisted the prevailing institutional research ethos. Consequently, the transmission of this methodology became a focus of my generative action and an integral part of the aesthetic I wished to leave to my students.

– Let me tell you all about qualitative research! This is research in the natural setting—observing in the school, the home, the workplace—and it involves gathering data directly from people by interviewing them, not using a questionnaire or some standardized test. You, yourself, are the data gathering instrument, and it means inquiring after people's experiences, how they feel and see things—from their own point of view. Kind of like stepping into their shoes and surveying the world that way. I believe you are real-

ly well-suited to this kind of research, [I explained to a student].

– Really? I think I would love that. I enjoy talking to people. It's been part of my job for years, and I am curious about how people feel and think and why they make the choices they make.

– Great. Then I shall suggest a reading list for you. You will have to read on two fronts at the same time: on your topic and on the methodology. I recommend you start with Bogdan and Biklen's book. I just love that book! [I continued].

This exchange typically opened the discussion of research methodology with the new postgraduate student who followed in quick succession after my first meeting with Mr. N. Students who were geographically distant were initiated by letter. I urged students to skill themselves by loaning my own thesis or other theses using qualitative methods from the library by mail order. I was in love—with a method; I was a zealous missionary and converts were easy to find. My second graduate was the first of many. Julia was a warm, good-natured woman in her early thirties who worked abroad for a Christian youth organization based in Britain. She strode into my office during a sabbatical in her home country and we instantly connected. Her interest lay in the experiences of high school students, parents, and teachers in Poland during the late-80s, a country she visited frequently for her work. She had a plausible proficiency in Polish and several professional contacts who could act as gatekeepers. She was my first student to produce an ethnographic case study—although we were both too methodologically naïve to call it that—using multiple data gathering during a period of extended fieldwork. The result was a de-

scription of a community in socio-political and educational transition—wistful in its descriptions of people caught up in dramatic change, sensitive to the hopeful yearnings of parents and adolescents, and rich in its intellectual discussions with a host of eminent expert informants (Bekker 1993).

My supervision of my keenest students who were engaged in a variety of qualitative designs was a source of vicarious delight—I did not have "time out" to immerse myself in lengthy fieldwork, but my students could. I was unable to experiment with novel data gathering techniques, but able and well-positioned students could. Around their efforts, my own projects, and my growing research expertise, I fashioned a personal aesthetic, a partly intuitive idea of what I and my ablest students should seek in research—"beauty, as well as truth, demanding that solutions be elegant and that the character of creative scientific work be also largely artistic" (Kay 1996:111). Thus, Glynis produced a full-blown ethnography of a home school—now couched in the correct terminology—and thereafter a performative inquiry in which her participants "danced the data" in a dramatic production (Moore 2002; 2009); Tshilidzi spent months shadowing the "woman in the principal's office" in a deep rural school, using her *emic* knowledge of language and culture to explore communication patterns in school management (Thakhathi 2001); Marwan interviewed and observed Catholic school principals in his native Lebanon (Tabet 1998); Meryl travelled to Australia to compare classroom practice of outcomes-based education to the faltering new curriculum reform efforts back home (Williamson 2000); a rabbi was participant observer in an Orthodox *yeshiva*, and

suggested pedagogical change that would not violate millennia of traditional pedagogy (Kraines 2006); Zengele produced a grounded theory. "But what if I collect all my data and I then don't discover a theory?," he worried as we poured over his notes spread over my dining room table. "Oh, of course, you will!" I declared impatiently, and so he developed his theory of teacher migration (Weda 2012). In these and other students' efforts, I was increasingly satisfied by a scholarly ideal of "well-formedness" (McAdams and Logan 2004:106), which inspired my subsequent student-supervisor relationships.

Vignette 4: Separation-Individuation of the Protégé

Generative care for a mentee who is less skilled and less knowledgeable is focused on empowerment and the avoidance of unhealthy dependence on the mentor. The mentor motivated by generativity does not seek to merely "drop" something into the life of his/her protégé; ultimately, the protégé should determine the meanings that his/her work will contain (Kotre and Kotre 1998). I found this true of postgraduate supervision, and it was Leone who taught me this lesson. She was a "second generation" student, a descriptor I had coined for those students who had completed a Master's degree under my supervision and returned, sometimes immediately, sometimes years later, to enroll for the doctorate. Supervision of "second generation" students was particularly rewarding due to their discernible development, which I could easily track as they progressed from one degree to the next. I was introduced to Leone shortly before I was capped; I was still plain Mrs. X. She was a charming, attractive woman in her early 50s, a music teacher and

a bright student who took her late-career studies seriously. She had been enquiring about a suitable supervisor for a Master's for some time and had eventually settled with a colleague far more experienced than me. After he unexpectedly resigned from the university, he referred Leone to me. Initially, she was unsure of herself and of my competence, and required constant reassurance. She read voraciously, but was nervous to write. When she began writing, she never knew when to stop. The same applied to her data gathering; she kept adding interview participants long after data saturation. She photocopied every article that interested her and when we chatted on the phone, she was always engaged in "filing or piling," as she described it. She called me at work; she called me at home. She got to distinguish my "busy" voice from my "friendly" one; I came to expect her daily messages left with the departmental secretary, my husband, or my daughters. Eventually, I invited her to dinner, and she became a regular weekend guest. My girls, who had joked about the constant phone calls, now lingered on the line to chat with her. She undertook a study trip to the United States, and returned with more information which demanded selective sifting, a shiny, red porcelain apple from New York for my desk, and mementos for my daughters. She graduated with her masters *cum laude*, and my husband and I celebrated her success in her new townhouse, where she had moved after a painful divorce. The university awarded her a merit grant for a doctorate, and once again we resumed discussions in my cramped office on campus. She matured into a decisive and confident student with strong ideas about what she wanted to do: a narrative inquiry of the career and personal development of successful professionals (de Villiers 2001). She still struggled with copious reading, but

now she knew how to extract the essence from the literature. She had mastered qualitative methodology; as an interviewer, she was empathetic and sensitive. She could draw people out and prompt them to articulate hidden feelings. She crafted twelve lively life story narratives. I was touched by the characters she described and intrigued by their career trajectories. She selected just the right extracts from lengthy transcripts to illustrate turning points in her participants' lives. Nonetheless, as a set, the narratives lacked coherence; they stood dislocated from one another.

– More wine, Leone? May give you inspiration! [My husband quipped and refilled her glass as Leone joined us at dinner one Friday evening].
– Thank you, and the lasagna is as delicious as always, [she answered].
– But now back to your findings, [I reminded her, ever task-orientated]. Your narratives stirred me, but taken as a whole, they lack unity. You must do something creative to weave your key findings together. I am so tired of mere descriptive categories in qualitative research reports!
– I agree, but how, can I be creative?
– You're a music teacher [piped up my youngest daughter] and a performer. Music's your life. Use something musical.

The next day Leone called.

I have it—the sonata form. Music's time proven point of departure for structuring creative expression: Exposition, Development, and Recapitulation. I shall synthesize the key findings in that form with relevant subdivisions. It'll be a perfect frame of reference for drawing key conclusions about the lives of my gifted participants.

I gulped. Would that work? Wasn't that taking creativity too far? What about the examination panel? Then I shot back, "Go for it!" After all, it was her thesis, her work, her baby, not mine. My supervision did not make sense if it did not lead a student to attain autonomy. Generative care required me to allow separation-individuation of my students, letting them go on "to interpret and use their products in unanticipated ways" (de St. Aubin 2013:243). It was my turn to step aside, move back, liberate my student from vestiges of my "control." Subsequently, Leone wrote a novel synthesis of research findings, clustered around the sonata form, and her stories came together in metaphorical harmony. Later, a member of the examination panel breached academic etiquette by surreptitiously calling me at home to tell me, "Now that's how a thesis should be done."

Vignette 5: Threats to Generativity and Redemption

In the face of the vicissitudes of life, the generative adult cannot sidestep generativity-threatening experiences, such as the death of a child or the symbolic "death" of a generative project. These realities have to be faced and the experience reworked into the life story if generative commitment is to survive (de St. Aubin 1998). McAdams (2006) argues that the redemption of failure and the embracing of a "second chance" are typical of highly generative adults. In this regard, it was particularly humbling to experience my steadfast belief in and commitment to supervision as generative act was threatened, not by another's failure but my own professional botch.

When I am anxious, I dream: of losing important documents, forgetting appointments, arriving late for a departure, dreams of missing the mark, stumbling at the bar. When I awake, I gratefully reassure myself that I am safe, secure, untouched by disaster. But, by late middle age, I had experienced my share of catastrophic dreams that did not melt in the early morning light. A nightmare, which morphed into a shameful reality, was sparked by these words on the examination report of Mr. Brown's doctoral thesis: "I have examined the abovementioned candidate's thesis and my recommendation is that it be referred back to the candidate for revision and resubmission for examination." Mr. Brown was an overseas student whose postgraduate supervision had been conducted solely by correspondence—initially, by written correspondence mailed between continents, and later by e-mail correspondence. This tuition mode is not unusual at my distance education institution, and at least a third of the large numbers of postgraduate students complete their degrees successfully without a face-to-face encounter with a supervisor. Mr. Brown intended to visit my country to receive his degree in person. The news of rejected thesis turned a celebratory visit into a remedial exercise. I met Mr. Brown and his daughter who accompanied him in the foyer of their hotel. Mr. Brown graciously accepted my repeated apologies: at supper at my favorite Greek restaurant, at a dinner in his honor at my home, during sightseeing trips around the city. Together we designed a second qualitative research phase comprising interviews to enrich his survey findings, which had been judged too thin by the examiner. Father and daughter left on their transatlantic flight home without reproaching me. I worked throughout the holidays on Mr. Brown's revised draft of his thesis. I worked on Christmas Day. I polished the text where it was uneven. I eased in the rich data where participant quo-

tations seemed to jar. The two phases of the newly introduced mixed-method design cohered seamlessly. I could not find a misplaced sentence to betray the anguish we had both felt—student and supervisor. The re-examination went off without a hitch and the degree certificate was duly dispatched to the new graduate. I kept the shame of this "stillbirth" to myself, as I suspected, most of my fellow supervisors did. Supervision in my institution is largely carried out in a private space, where the inclusion or exclusion of related events to the collegiate is self-monitored. I only admitted to success; failure was furtively hidden. A confidante pointed out that I had not been at my academic best since my husband's death three months prior to the first submission of Mr. Brown's thesis. "Surely a trauma as powerful as that is sufficient to serve as an explanation for your misjudgment?," she suggested. But, I did not allow that kind of rationalization. I rejected her justification roughly, even rudely. My erroneous evaluation that a piece of work had met the standards and could proceed safely to examination warranted no excuse.

As I recalled this "memory with a sting" (Denzin 2013:123), Mr. Brown's thesis lay next to my computer, elegantly bound in green with gold lettering. I thumbed through it again and again, willing myself to find some flaw that would betray its unfortunate history. But, there was no trace of weakness in methodology or findings, not even a typo. In fact, I have since frequently referred subsequent students to the work as an apt example of mixed-method design. But, this did not mean that I could alter my story, or Mr. Brown's, for that matter. He never got to cross the stage in the grand auditorium as he had hoped, with the special applause given to an international student

ringing in his ears. That was ruled out by the expense of a second trip from his home country to mine. I did not ever know how he had handled the embarrassment of delayed examination results at his workplace, what explanation he had given to his friends or neighbors. I could only imagine it. All I knew is that I was accountable for his disappointment, his humiliation. As a supervisor, I had failed. With the "death" of this project, my commitment to generative care foundered. I recalled Professor O's words like a judgment: "Remember your name is on the thesis, too. The student passes, you pass. The student fails, you have failed." I found myself in the place of the penitent practitioner who must face the facts of his/ her shame and guilt in the light of professional error (MacFarlane and Gourlay 2009). In the aftermath of this bungled affair, I sought self-repair in a renewal of my commitment to the rest of my postgraduate students. Their enthusiastic e-mails, phone calls, personal visits and the constant stream of their chapters, which arrived on my desk for my comment, limited time for brooding. The generative cycle would have been broken irretrievably if this failure was not integrated into my overarching theme of purpose and self-worth (MacFarlane and Gourlay 2009). Redeeming my future as a supervisor depended on my "fear, guilt, shame, or despair … giving way to the experience of happiness, joy, excitement, growth" (McAdams 2006:88), which accompanied the guidance of new students.

Vignette 6: Perpetuating the Generative Cycle

As a cyclical process, generativity is sustained by inspiring and recruiting the next generation to partici-

pate in the ongoing cycle of worthwhile generative endeavor (de St. Aubin 1998). As my career moves to its end, the desire to engender and witness a generative commitment in my students becomes more urgent.

At 8h00 on a Wednesday morning in January 2014, Marietta arrived promptly for her weekly consultation on thesis writing. We settled ourselves in front of my computer in my untidy study in my home office. My two dogs ceased sniffing the visitor and settled themselves at our feet. Marietta hooked her brown satchel over her chair and tipped a pile of books onto the cluttered desk. A book with a royal blue spine caught my eye.

– Oh, I see you've come across Howard Gardner, [I remarked]. He's renowned for his work on creativity, which is your thesis topic. I'd forgotten all about him.
– Gardner's a great find. Guess how I discovered his work? By reading Leone's thesis which you lent me, even though her research dates back to the mid-90s. Of course, she used his earlier works. And I got so many amazing ideas for my research design during my coffee date with another of your old students, Glynis. Thanks for that introduction, too, [Marietta responded].
– I was certain Glynis would be helpful. Did I ever tell you how her research design evolved? [I asked]. I went to a conference in Lisbon and heard this fantastic presentation on performative inquiry, and when I returned, I suggested that Glynis use it in her study. I knew she was a drama teacher and writing an ethnodrama with her multiracial drama students seemed a perfect method for her to work with.
– Right! But, that is how research seems to work. One person passing on what they are passionate about to the next. It is like a chain that links one researcher to the

next. I feel like your former students have passed the baton on to me, and now I must run my race with it. Hopefully, I can also pass it on to another student some day! [Exclaimed Marietta].
– You've distilled my academic credo in a nutshell. But, believe me, not every academic shares expertise so generously. I know plenty of people who play their cards close to their chest. I've just read a recent article by Pratt [2013] who stresses that not everyone is generative. But, they miss a lot! One of the most authoritative voices on generativity, Ed de St. Aubin [2013], writes that academic meaning-making lies in our sharing and passing on our know-how to the new cohort of scholars. This connects us to something bigger than ourselves, and that what gives scholarship meaning, [I concluded].

Marietta sighed, contented with the thought. I, too, was satisfied with our consensus.

As I confront mandatory retirement from academic life within a short time, I realize a generative "mission" as encapsulated in my supervision has expanded once again to include the transmission of an ideal of how a scholar should fit into the larger social context of academe. The prolongation of generative action in academe is only ensured when generative scholars successfully recruit their students to engage in similar service through both example and passion (Neumann 2006).

Conclusion

Faust (2003) says,

We create ourselves out of the stories we tell about our lives, stories that impose purpose and meaning

on experiences that often seem random and discontinuous. As we scrutinize our own past in the effort to explain ourselves to ourselves we discover—or invent—consistent motivations, characteristic patterns, fundamental values, a sense of self. Fashioned out of memories, our stories become our identities. (p. 1)

So what has my story interpreted through the lens of generativity taught me about my supervisor identity (Driscoll 2000)? Through autoethnography, I have been enabled to direct the inward gaze to act as a "visionary accomplice capable of self-seeing" (Massumi 2002:32), doubling back in deep self-reflection to examine how I as an individual have interacted with my students; how I have responded, or reacted to, and at times resisted, this particular university environment where I have supervised graduates, located not only in southern Africa but also in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and Australia. I have discovered, together with Ellis (2011), my approach to academe is less about career, but more about vocation. "You mustn't get so involved with your students," a former colleague rebuked me recently. I ignored the well-intentioned remark because I could not reconcile myself with her advice. My ongoing gratification lies in the transformation I see, not so much in society, but in my students. "You know, Professor, why I want to do this Doctorate?," Caro asked me during a discussion on her new research proposal, "Because the Masters didn't answer my questions! I am not talking about the research question. It did that, sure, but not the questions I have now!" I have been rewarded by another un-curious student who has become inquiring. The ideals I wish to achieve with supervision resonate with my own values-based generativity project,

which has become more pronounced in its intensity and deliberate in its goals in late career. If generativity is driven by a desire to outwit mortality by "conserving, renovating, or creating of a meaning system: the 'mind' of culture" (Kotre and Kotre 1998:379), my intentionality in supervision thinly disguises the aspiration to leave some legacy, which will outlive my academic "death" soon to be concretized in mandatory retirement. However, I acknowledge that an autoethnography cannot remain only an exercise in enlarged self-knowledge. As Humphreys (2005:851) asks, "Has my autobiographical narrative … focused your gaze in the same direction?" Through personal and intimate storying, my other intention is to cast the outward gaze on university life, which is so often dominated by meta-analysis (Trahar 2011). In sum, my university presents many opportunities for generative action, but these opportunities can also

be resisted and ignored. The onus of generativity lies squarely on the individual scholar who must be motivated by inner desire before he or she can be incentivized by institutional rewards or coerced by cultural norms. Finally, by using my own story, I have endeavored to disrupt the boundaries of the research meta-narrative (Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz 2011) in a way that extends even the concept of the qualitative in research. The self-reflection contained in these vignettes is not aimed at indulgent narcissism, but rather as an invitation to the reader to develop professional wisdom as we learn to know ourselves and seek to improve our practice as supervisors and mentors (Mann, Gordon, and McLeod 2009). Inner reflection, particularly reflection on the "intricacies of emotion" (Ellis 2009:105), should deepen, not diminish, our knowledge of the world "out there."

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